

VZCZCXRO7282
RR RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK
DE RUEHRB #1983/01 2961305
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 231305Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY RABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5014
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 2279
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0624

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 001983

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/23/2016
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KPKO](#) [MA](#) [WI](#)
SUBJECT: SAHRAWI ACTIVISTS OUTLINE GRIEVANCES AND POSSIBLE
STEPS FORWARD

Classified by Political Counselor Craig Karp for Reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) During a mid-October visit to Western Sahara, Sahrawi human rights activists indicated profound alienation from Moroccan authorities and deep skepticism about any autonomy package the GOM might be preparing, charging that human rights practices in the region were getting worse. They viewed CORCAS as an unrepresentative instrument of the "occupation." They spoke of a Sahrawi "intifada," although their own account of the situation was less dramatic. To reverse their lack of confidence in the Moroccan government, they demanded:

- Removal of the GUS, the national police tactical squad, deployed since 2005 and famed for cracking heads;
- Cessation of repression, torture, disappearances, and home invasions by security forces;
- Allow the Sahrawis freedom of expression, even if that means a few Polisario flags;
- Liberate 33 remaining political prisoners; and
- Officially recognize/register human rights and civil society groups.

¶2. (C) Separately, the leader of a pro-GOM Sahrawi NGO offered a diametrically opposite (and relatively less representative) view, claiming that the Polisario were "Algerian Sahrawi" pretenders with no credible claim to the former Spanish Sahara. Claiming to be Tekla Sahrawis, a coastal tribe, versus the mostly Raguibat Polisario, they reminded us of the tribal aspect of the conflict. Both sides, however, indicated distrust of MINURSO, and both offered either sparse or no recent data on instances of political violence or abuses. Both sides told us that any autonomy plan had to include Sahrawization of the police. End summary.

Sahrawi Activists Paint a Bleak Picture

¶3. (C) During their mid-October visit to Western Sahara, poloffs were invited to share an Iftar (the meal which breaks the daily Ramadan fast) with a group of seven Sahrawi human rights activists sympathetic to the Polisario liberation movement. Most had spent at least some time in Moroccan jails. One attendee had spent more than four years in prison

in Morocco in the 1970s, in what he described as extremely inhumane conditions.

14. (C) Key points emerging from the meeting included:

- A sense of profound alienation from the Moroccan authorities, perceived as occupiers thwarting native Sahrawis' right to self-determination;
- The low credibility of CORCAS, the Royal Commission formed by the GOM ostensibly to represent Sahrawi views in the policy process. The activists claimed recent CORCAS "consultations" in the region were actually occasions to threaten locals with retaliation if they did not submit to Moroccan control;
- Given the perceived hegemonic agenda and brutal track-record of the GOM, the Sahrawis dismissed talk of an autonomy plan as empty propaganda;
- A contention that Moroccan human rights practices in the region have deteriorated in the past year after a slight improvement in the initial period following the death of Hassan II and the succession of King Mohammed VI (though they could offer few recent examples since the crackdown after the May 2005 demonstrations to support the claim);
- Two cases - the death of Sahrawi activist Hamdi Lembarki at a Layoune pro-independence demonstration in October 2005, and the overnight detention and rough handling of a pro-independence teenager in February 2006, were cited as examples of ongoing excessive force;
- Also cited was the 2005-06 arrest and detention of our host, Sahrawi activist Brahim Dahane (strictly protect), who

RABAT 00001983 002 OF 003

was detained in late October 2005 and released mid-April. Dahane implied that his arrest had been prompted either by his meeting with U.S. Emboffs during their October 2005 visit to Layoune, his role in publicizing internationally the Lembarki case, or both;

- Two other members of their circle, activists Saber Brahim and Subai Ahmed, are currently languishing in a Moroccan jail, the activists added;
 - Further allegations that Moroccan security forces routinely order Sahrawi "trouble-makers" to emigrate from the territory or face death;
 - A vague (and seemingly paradoxical) story offered in the same breath about a boatload of a dozen Sahrawis which recently disappeared in an Atlantic fog as they tried to make their way to the Canary Islands, speculating that the boat had been seized by Moroccan authorities and the passengers were being held incommunicado;
 - Complaints of the lack of good educational, vocational, and economic opportunities for native youth in the territory. The stagnant environment was causing a drain of native Sahrawis from the area, the activists claimed, leaving behind in Layoune a growing majority of transplanted Moroccans;
 - Frustration and even disdain voiced toward MINURSO, which they believed "had accomplished nothing" for the cause of Sahrawi self-determination and did not even employ any local Sahrawis at their Layoune headquarters, they claimed;
 - Repeated references to a Sahrawi "intifada" and predictions that if MINURSO was withdrawn there would be war in the territory -- not on the berm, but in the streets of Layoune;
- and
- Dismay that their efforts to work the Moroccan legal system

had been rebuffed and that their efforts to register as a legal NGO denied.

15. (C) Also present at the Iftar were two Spanish lawyers from Barcelona, visiting Layoune as international human rights observers of a trial the next day of a Sahrawi dissident. They anticipated no problems, although the Sahrawis maintained they themselves would be barred from the courthouse. When asked how their presence squared with the refusal to allow the visit of a European parliament delegations, the attorneys replied that lawyers, with a reputation for impartiality, are generally permitted to come in and observe, even when journalists and politicians were not.

Visit to a Pro-Moroccan Sahrawi NGO

16. (C) At the other end of the Sahrawi political spectrum, poloffs visited on October 13 the Layoune offices of the Sahrawi Association for Victims of Polisario. Chairman Dahia Aguai showed off the groups' premises, which featured large murals on the office walls depicting alleged Polisario atrocities, each labeled "Torture methods practiced by the Polisario." The crude paintings portrayed several torture scenes, including one of a man being drawn-and-quartered in the desert by four camels, at the direction of men wearing olive fatigues, their faces shrouded in sinister black turbans. Aguai and other interlocutors identified themselves as members of the Tekla tribe of Sahrawis, traditionally resident in coastal areas, and a tribe with longstanding ties to the Moroccan throne.

17. (C) With an otherwise silent participant by his side taking copious notes of his own presentation, Aguai offered a drawn-out account of the position of pro-Moroccan Sahrawis:

- The Polisario, based in Tindouf, Algeria, are actually Algerian Sahrawis of the Raguibat tribe with no credible claim to the former Spanish Sahara. (Note: The Raguibat's traditional territory does extend from the northeast of the former Spanish Sahara well into western Algeria end note.);

- Algeria is cynically supporting the Tindouf Sahrawis' claim to Spanish Sahara to preempt any Sahrawi separatism within its own borders;

- MINURSO, and the UN as a whole, has no credibility - they have been consistently biased toward the Polisario and unfairly hostile to Morocco;

RABAT 00001983 003 OF 003

- The recent report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is proof of the UN's bias - they disregarded all of the information Aguai's group had provided regarding Polisario atrocities;

- Several attendees told us they had been prisoners of the Polisario during the 1970s and 80s. One showed us his badly scarred back, which he said was the result of torture by the Polisario;

- The group offered no details of any recent cases of abuse by the Polisario, but claimed to regularly receive information from sympathetic contacts inside the Polisario-controlled refugee camps in Algeria;

- Unexpectedly asked what they thought would be essential elements of a prospective autonomy plan, they replied that the police and other security forces should be Sahrawi.

Comment

18. (C) Of the two groups, we judge the dissidents who offered us Iftar the more credible and representative of Sahrawi views and attitudes. The "Victims of the Polisario" NGO was an unsophisticated showpiece, obviously sponsored by the GOM, to counter the information put out to the world by Polisario-leaning human rights activists. It was noteworthy that both groups, from their opposing perspectives, criticized MINURSO, which suggests that the UN Mission is fairly successfully refraining from playing favorites, and both sides thought the Security forces needed a Sahrawi character.

19. (C) It was particularly significant that neither the fervently pro-independence activists, nor their pro-GOM adversaries, could offer much data or detail on recent instances of political violence or human rights violations. While local grievances are real and deeply felt, the intensity and magnitude of this conflict pales in comparison to other trouble spots on the African continent or elsewhere in the world. Indeed, while the heavy police presence on Layoune's streets was clearly incongruent with the city's low crime rate, the territorial capital did not feel like a "city under siege." Each evening during our visit, crowds of native Sahrawis, Moroccan migrants, and the occasional foreigner, jammed the city's sidewalks and squares to enjoy the festive Ramadan atmosphere. End comment.

Visit Embassy Rabat's Classified Website;
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/rabat>

Riley